

WHAT IS THIS ELECTRIC-AGE AGRICULTURE?

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By

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WHAT IS THIS ELECTRIC-AGE AGRICULTURE?

I INTRODUCTION

Much is said about "images" these days and how to sharpen them, correct them, tone them down, or improve them. What is agriculture's image in late 1966? And how much has it changed in the past decade or two? In other words, what is this electric-age agriculture?

II AGRICULTURE IS LESS FLEXIBLE; MORE MOBILE

Although this statement seems to be a contradiction, it really isn't. All over the South today really efficient farmers are less flexible from the point of view of installations and costs of doing business than ever before in history. At the same time they are more flexible in getting jobs done in adverse conditions than ever before.

Recently I visited an Alabama dairyman who has been offered \$1 million to leave his 700-acre farm to real estate developers, with one year to vacate the premises. An outsider might exclaim, "What's he waiting for?"

But this man has a double-8 milking parlor that enabled him to reduce the number of milking men from seven to three. He built the parlor at a cost of around \$30,000. This man has two silos that hold 2,200 tons of silage--some of the largest in Alabama. His feeding system is completely automated with augers, paved and covered feedlot, and all the extras to go with this. When I was last on his farm he was seriously considering buying a tractor that was going to cost a little better than \$10,000. This man's operation isn't a flexible one at all. He's in business to stay.

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On the other hand, with that \$10,000 tractor and the other automated equipment on his farm, this man can do jobs much, much more quickly than he could just 10 years ago. He can put in an entire corn crop for silage in a matter of a few days when the weather gets right, whereas a few years ago a rainy spell at plantingtime or harvesttime often meant failure.

Some months ago I visited a broiler operation in one of our Southeastern states where seven costly, completely equipped houses were filled with some of the healthiest broilers I have ever seen. From the point of view of equipment to make the operation efficient, this man was as up-to-date as this morning's newspaper. He had the automatic feeders, waterers, special ventilation system--the whole bit. The electric panel for controlling this operation seemed to me to be as complicated as one for a small village where I used to live. This man's operation wasn't flexible at all.

But it was mobile. He was selling broilers in California, competing with a market that a few years ago he couldn't possibly touch because of transportation problems and other shortcomings. He can put broilers in California supermarkets cheaper than California growers can put them there! Give this man a nickel-a-bushel advantage on grains shipped in from the mid-West, and he'll compete with broiler growers in any state in the United States. He's really mobile.

I have a friend down South who is now growing out and finishing _____ hogs a year on steel slatted floors, with temperatures partially controlled, automatic feed bins, and a lagoon underneath the feeding house to take care of waste. He has studied experiment station results, hog-feeding units in

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But it was mobile. He was selling broilers in California, competing with a market that a few years ago he couldn't possibly touch because of transportation problems and other shortcomings. He can put broilers in California supermarkets cheaper than California growers can put them there! Give this man a nickel-a-pound advantage on grains shipped in from the mid-West, and he'll compete with broiler growers in any state in the United States. He's really mobile.

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in other states, and added some of his own innovations in establishing a costly but very efficient feeding system. He isn't very flexible! He really cannot go out of the hog business without taking tremendous losses.

But he, too, is mobile. He can compete with any grower in his state in cost-per-pound of producing high quality pork.

One of the key things in making all of these changes possible on all of these farms has been the more efficient use of electricity. And people in this room this morning have had a great deal to do with helping each of these persons to use electricity in a far more efficient manner than was dreamed possible just one decade ago. Someone told me the other day that there are now over 500,000 electric motors on farms in just one of our states in this country. Just think of that!

III FARMING IS MORE HAZARDOUS

In spite of all the efficiencies electricity and new technology have brought about, things still have to "work out right" for farmers to make satisfactory profits--or to avoid losing heavily. I have already pointed to the high fixed expenses in various types of farming operations in the Southeast, but even with these enormous expenses there are still some potential loss factors that a farmer cannot control.

A couple of years ago I was in Florida visiting some citrus growers and I ran across one man who had just spent \$50,000 attempting to develop one machine. This fellow had placed a farm tractor on wheels that were about 10 feet apart and on legs 10 feet high. It was a Rube Goldberg type development, but the man who had spent the \$50,000 thought he had a machine that would cultivate, fertilize, and spray on insecticides in one trip

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across the field, straddling citrus trees as much as 10 feet tall.

The land on which this machine operated was valued at \$4,000 to \$5,000 an acre. The cost of operating this particular farm astounded me. The day I was there a hedging machine was trimming older trees, and the cost of the machine itself was enough to frighten a fellow who grew up on a small North Georgia cotton farm.

In spite of all these modern gadgets and the efficiencies that have come to that citrus farm, about eight months later a freeze wiped out many of this man's older trees. He hasn't recovered from the loss yet.

I have a friend down at home who plants each year about 400 to 500 acres of cotton. He has all of the tractors, mechanical pickers, spraying and dusting machines, and other items that are made to grow this much cotton efficiently. He even is part owner of a gin so that he is assured of efficient and on-the-spot ginning at harvesttime. This fellow has taken almost every precaution possible to make his cotton-growing enterprise a successful one. But this year unfavorable weather and resulting poor stands, insect attacks, and low quality harvested cotton cut his gross take in half. He simply couldn't overcome some of the hazards of growing cotton.

Some time ago I visited a beef feeder over in Georgia. This young man was feeding out 200 to 400 animals at a time. He was growing nearly all the corn needed in the feeding operation. He did his own grinding and mixing of feed. He had a carefully worked out marketing arrangement with a local packer. He was an expert in buying feeders. It seemed to me, as I spent the day with him talking about his operation, that here was a man who had covered all the bases.

But there were some hazards he could not insure against. A price break

that occurred some time after my visit and became a prolonged period of depressed prices almost ruined this young fellow financially.

So, in spite of all the techniques that we have today to make efficient farm production possible, there are still some hazards that are difficult to overcome.

IV FARMERS ARE MORE EDUCATED AND MORE BUSINESSLIKE

In my travels over the Southeast, I encounter more and more farmers who are pushing agricultural experiment stations, Extension workers, and other educational leaders to stay ahead of them. In our Southern territory we do have broad, well supported governmental research programs, but the South's agriculture is broad, and the needs for research are great.

A friend of mine in North Carolina makes regular trips to Cornell and to other experiment stations just to be certain that he is abreast of the very latest developments in poultry research. North Carolina State University has an excellent poultry research program, but this fellow doesn't miss a single bet. Farmers from all over the world come to Auburn, Alabama, for research on fish growing.

In at least three or four of our states, planeloads of farmers get together each year under the leadership of some commercial group and visit some other section of the United States or maybe some other section of the world to study and learn about last-minute trends and developments in agriculture.

This keen desire for the very latest in agricultural developments is leading our colleges and numerous other groups to continually revamp and shore up their programs of teaching, research, and Extension.

